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INTERNMENT YEARS

Despite my Asian features, with a different cultural upbringing from yours, I am speaking to you today as a fellow-American. I was born and raised in California, but when war broke out in 1941, the Japanese on the West Coast became a part of what has been called the largest single compulsory evacuation in American history. To young people like you, World War II, Pearl Harbor and its aftermath, must seem like long past history. But I still live in my mind those frightening months that led to the uprooting and imprisonment of the Japanese people and years of internment in isolated camps for the duration of the war. And I cannot forget.

The United States, as you well know, had attracted for decades people of many nationalities. And I am sure that among you yourselves there is a blend of different origins. The Pacific Coast drew Asian immigrants, as the Atlantic Coast received Europeans, all seeking a new life, new opportunities, in this country. For the Asians, their role in the United States began ten years before the Civil War. The Japanese immigrants first settled in Hawaii to work on the sugar and pineapple plantations. They they began coming to the West Coast as agricultural laborers, and soon became the target of discrimination. A pattern of anti-Oriental hostility had already been established, a carry-over from the early years when the Chinese people came to settle in this country. The agitation against the Japanese started in 1919, three years after I was born, and it was this racism that brought about our removal after Pearl Harbor.

With this sketchy background, let me take you back in time to the Sunday morning of December 7, 1941, at 7:55 a.m. At that hour, I was giving my little son, not quite three months old, his morning feeding. I had just turned on the radio. I was stunned to hear the announcer presenting his grim news of the attack by enemy Japanese aircraft on Pearl Harbor. My immediate thought, and worry, was how would the Japanese living in this country be affected. I soon learned. All Japanese funds were frozen; credit became impossible. By that night I found that I could not even buy milk at the corner grocery store where I had been shopping for months. Because of the prohibitions against trading with the enemy, as he put it, the grocer refused to sell anything to me.

In the panicky weeks after Pearl Harbor, the feeling against the Japanese turned hostile. A superpatriot chopped down four of the Japanese cherry trees along the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. The Tennessee State Department of Purchasing declared "open season on Japs, no license required", and an elderly Japanese man and his wife were shot to death in their beds in El Centro, California. The U.S. Attorney General reported 36 instances of crime and brutality against the West Coast Japanese between December 8, 1941, and March 31, 1942. And my brother Roy enlisted in the United States Army.

Immediately with the beginning of the war, the Department of Justice, through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had arrested enemy agents and persons known to harbor suspicious intent. There were numerous repeated investigations and arrests, and we were in constant fear of unexpected FBI raids.

It was when the Japanese problem was transferred to the War Department that the unprecedented abrogation of civil rights of a racial minority occurred. Then there was no consideration of individuals, whether innocent or guilty, citizen

or alien. They were all subject to the control of the Western Defense Command, established on December 11, 1941, when the West Coast was declared a theater of war under the command of General John L. DeWitt.

By the end of January, 1942, public opinion identified all Japanese on the West Coast as the enemy. We were already under curfew and had to be off the streets between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. We found it increasingly hard to shop or market for our large family. Public temper became more spiteful. And on February 19th, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the War Department to set up military areas and to exclude any or all persons of Japanese descent from these areas.

None of us knew when our evacuation order would be issued. But by a series of 108 separate orders, General DeWitt ordered all Japanese removed from the West Coast, which included all of Washington, Oregon and California, and a portion of Arizona. The explanation given for the mass evacuation was that of military necessity. Since no preparation had been made for so huge an exodus, fairgrounds and racetracks were commandeered for use as temporary assembly centers, and Army Engineers constructed primitive barracks at these sites.

In March my family began preparations for the evacuation. Liquidation of property, in many instances at great sacrifice, proceeded at a rapid pace, and opportunists took advantage of the bewildered Japanese. Even with our family, we had strangers,conming unannounced, wandering through our house to look for bargains. Mother was busy supervising with the discarding and packing of our belongings, and one day she was so irked by the interruption of a stranger that she sold our kitchen stove and dining room set for five dollars. Our losses were, in comparison to those of other Japanese, not as heavy. Yet this forced exodus meant sudden upheaval, parting from friends, abandoning possessions, and adjusting elsewhere to a life we could not begin to imagine.

With other Japanese from the San Francisco Bay region, my family was sent from Berkeley to the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno, south of San Francisco. The morning of our departure, a sunny April day, we assembled at a church, surrounded by military guards with drawn bayonets. We were taken by chartered buses across the bay bridge to the racetrack. Here we were assigned the family identification number of 13423 and housed in horse-stalls. Because of the size of our family, we were allowed two horse-stalls as living quarters, and here we were introduced to communal existence -- eating in a mess-hall, bathing in doorless bath and shower cubicles, using doorless toilet stalls, observing curfew, under the constant surveillance of Caucasian camp police. Civil liberties were at a minimum, and the racetrack was securely guarded, surrounded by watch towers manned by armed sentries, and searchlights played around the camp at night.

Churches were established to bolster the morale of the distressed and humiliated people, so there were Protestant, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist and Buddhist groups, the last the largest congregation. Another boost to the spirit was the opportunity to work, and the physically able-bodied found jobs. The wages were set at eight dollars for the unskilled; twelve dollars for the skilled; and sixteen dollars for the professionals (doctors, teachers, and those in administrative positions). Later after we were moved to the permanent internment camp, the salary scale was increased to twelve, sixteen and nineteen dollars for the various levels. In addition, if one worked, one could receive a clothing allowance of $3.75 a month.

Schools were also started for children and adults, and volunteer evacuee

teachers, I among them, were hired. To the young people who had grown up in closely knit families, camp life meant the disruption of orderly living, and those of us who became teachers felt that they needed the stabilizing influence of a regular school program. A group of us who were recent graduates from the universities in Berkeley and Palo Alto opened a "high school", so-called, and to our amazement, 500 high school students registered for our classes of their own accord. The curriculum was based on the core curriculum of the California school system. I taught English, because that had been one of my majors at the University of California.

The conditions under which we taught were unlike anything ever experienced in an organized school. Ours was literally an "open school". The large open area of the grandstand inside, where betting windows lined one wall, was used for the whole school, without walls or partitions between the classes. I had to out-lecture the civics instructor to my left, the mathematics instructor to my right, and the public speaking instructor straight ahead. There were occasional disciplinary problems, but the students were intent on learning.

We even held school assemblies outside on the grandstand seats. I still remember vividly our first assembly. The students sat on the upper tiers of seats, and the teachers on the first row below. Somehow the principal had managed to borrow a public speaking equipment, and he introduced the faculty members, one by one, and stated the universities where we had had schooling. He named the graduates from the University of California first, then the few remaining from the Stanford University. If you are aware of the rivalry in football between the Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, you will understand the reaction that followed. As soon as the Stanfordites were introduced, a commotion arose among the students, as they began to stomp their feet and clap their hands, because they, like any American youngsters, were rooting for the "underdog"! When the session ended, the principal said that the students were to return to their classes. All the student body stood up, and I do not know who started the singing. But all the students were singing "God Bless America". People strolling around the oval track down below stopped to listen. I turned to a fellow teacher, who was also a minister, and he whispered to me, "Those blessed kids!"

In August rumors began to seep through the assembly center that we were to be moved to a permanent camp in Utah. The permanent camps were called relocation centers or projects, and ten were established from California to Arkansas under the War Relocation Authority, a civilian body. Bulletins on how to prepare for the moving appeared, but no one knew until September when the actual relocation would occur. Again there were the stir and unrest of packing and crating. Everything had to be packed, tagged, and inspected by the Army two days before departure.

The first group that left our assembly center for Utah was the advance work group of 214 people, all volunteers, to make way for the induction of those who were to follow.. Among them was my brother Bill, a bacteriologist, on the sanitary engineering crew. Since our horse-stall barracks was closest to the fence near the departure gate, where the train was to stop, we soon discovered that our stable roof provided a convenient place for send-offs. People came from far ends of the racetrack to climb up on the roof with hand-printed signs and banners, some with the message "See you soon!"

Our destination was the Central Utah Relocation Project, which was more often called Topaz after a mountain in the west, and it came into existence on September 11, 1942, with the arrival of the internees. The Utah camp was situated on the "Plains of Abraham", where a Mormon pastor hhad once prophesied, after he

had failed in attempts at agriculture, that a "new people will come along and make the desert bloom some day." The Utah center began to fill, as one contingent after another were shipped out of the assembly camp. The volunteers who had gone ahead worked at the receiving stations, interviewing, registering, housing, and explaining to travel-weary newcomers what they must do and where they must go. These volunteers later became clerks, stenographers and receptionists in administrative offices, staff members in the hospital, and they laid the foundation of a kind of municipal civil service composed of block managers, and set up the community store we called the canteen. The new arrivals, coming in a steady stream, were poured into the empty blocks, as into a row of empty bottles. The reception procedure became known as the "intake", and it left a lasting impression on all who witnessed it.

My family, with the exception of Bill, arrived in Topaz on October 3, 1942. Bill was waiting for us at the intake gate, along with a small band of Boy Scouts in uniform as they blared on brass instruments, in the dust and heat, their version of "Hail, hail, the gang's all here". Though we had become accustomed to the sight of barracks in Tanforan, this new camp appeared utterly desolate and barren, with hundreds of low-lying, black tar-papered barracks lined up in rows through the blocks. Even the banner the scouts held aloft, reading "Welcome to Topaz, the Jewel of the Desert", seemed incongruous.

The blocks were the size of regular city blocks we had known, but so different. Each block held 14 barracks arranged in two rows with an alley between. In this alley were located the latrine building that housed the shower stalls, lavatories, again without doors or curtains, and the laundry tubs. , and the mess hall building.. There was no running water in the barracks, so at night we had to be sure to bring back a bucket of water that Mother covered with a clean towel, that we might have fresh water for drinking. Since the barracks had been newly built, with no insulation, we no longer had to contend with the smells we endured in the Tanforan horse stalls.

The population of Topaz numbered approximately 8,000, with most of the internees from the San Francisco Bay area. As the residents settled in and adjusted to the rigors of bitterly cold winters, the ever prevalent dust storms, and the harshness of camp life, we tried to live as normally as possible. Once again schools, churches and libraries were established, and I taught English and Latin in the Topaz High School, as well as in the Basic English Department of the Adult Education Division. Later I transferred to the Topaz Public Library, which influenced my career choice after I relocated to Cincinnati.

Eventually many Nisei took advantage of the "indefinite leave" program, by which, after proper clearance by the government and assurance of a job "outside", they could leave camp and settle in cities in the Midwest and in the East. By their leaving before the camps closed, they enabled their Issei parents to join them. My high school students went on to colleges and universities and prepared for professional careers. To this day I still am in touch with some of them.

At the beginning of 1943, the Army decided to recuit a Japanese American combat team. This combat team, drawn from Hawaii and the internment camps, became the much-decorated and honored 442nd Regimental Combat Team, whose heroism and battle record gradually turned public opinion favorably towards us. I realized their ultimate sacrifice years later when I visited their cemetery, called the Punch Bowl, in Honolulu, where rows and rows of inscribed plaques, set in the ground, with names and regiment, attest to their courage in this peaceful setting.

Here too is buried Ernie Pyle, the famous war correspondent, between two unknown soldiers. And I remembered the many Bronze Star and Purple Heart mothers in Topaz.

In December, 1944, the Supreme Court ruled that citizens whose loyalty had been found unquestionable could not be held in the camps. The Army then rescinded the exclusion order. Protests against the return of the Japanese to the West Coast continued for a while, but after the surrender of Japan, we felt that our rightful place as citizens of this country was restored. So the camps closed down. Members of my family had relocated to Cincinnati, so by the time Topaz was to close, my parents, my youngest brother Lee and my son and I were the only ones left. And we went to Cincinnati the end of October, 1945.

As our camp began to shut down and we were once more seeing friends off at the departure gate. As the residents departed and the blocks became depleted, messhalla were consolidated, and I found myself walking several blocks away for meals and felt like a transient stranger in an unfamiliar mess hall. Mother would not go to a mess hall she did not know, so I brought back her meals on a tray. I must admit though that walking on an uneven, rocky road with a tray bearing an orange and a bowl of soup for lunch , with the fruit rolling and hitting the bowl, with each step, could be disastrous. Mother would look at the tray I brought to her and the almost empty bowl, and quietly ask, "Where is the soup?" She knew.

How often in those final weeks of our internment, at night as I looked out at the darkened windows of the neighboring barracks, I would think of the events that had brought us to this place, of people I would never see again, and wonder what was in store for us on the outside. When we were first interned at Tanforan, my son had been but five months old, and now as we were about to leave camp, he was just past his fourth birthday. He had never seen a concrete building, or even a regular house with a garden, a city, a lawn, a park, a bush in bloom or trees, people with different faces and coloring. After we relocated, I learned to appreciate, as I saw through his eyes, the fresh sight of a wondering child, the outside world from another perspective and accepted the release and new freedom as he did.